GUIDELINES FOR THE JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

ADAPTED FOR USE IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

FROM THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES'

"ECUMENICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON CHRISTIAN-JEWISH DIALOGUE"

by

THE PRESIDING BISHOP'S ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON

JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

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PREFACE

One of the functions of the Jewish-Christian dialogue is to allow participants to describe and witness to their faith in their own terms. This is of primary importance since self-serving descriptions of other peoples' faith are among the roots of prejudice, stereotyping, and condescension. Graceful listening to another's faith understanding enables Christians to obey better the commandment not to bear false witness against their neighbors. Partners in dialogue must recognize that any religion or ideology that claims universality will have its own interpretations of other religions and ideologies as part of its own self-understanding. Dialogue gives the opportunity for mutual questioning of those understandings. A reciprocal willingness to listen, learn and understand enables significant dialogue to grow.

I. PRINCIPLES OF DIALOGUE

1. In all dialogue recognition of marked cultural differences becomes important. The words employed in religious discussion are not innocent or neutral. Partners in dialogue may rightly question both the language and the definitions each uses in articulating religious matters.

2. In the case of Jewish-Christian dialogue, a distorting historical and theological imbalance is obvious. While an understanding of Judaism in New Testament times becomes an indispensable part of any Christian theology, for Jews a "theological" understanding of Christianity is not of the same significance. Yet neither Judaism nor Christianity, at least in the western world, has developed without interaction with the other.

3. The relations between Jews and Christians have unique

characteristics, since Christianity historically emerged out of early Judaism. Christian understandings of that process constitute a necessary part of the dialogue and give urgency to the enterprise. As Christianity came to define its own identity in relation to Judaism, the church developed understandings, definitions, and terms for those things it had inherited from Jewish traditions. It also developed its own interpretation of the scriptures common to Jews and Christians. In the process of defining itself, the church produced its own definition of God's acts of salvation. It should not be surprising that Jews resent those scriptural and theological interpretations in which they are assigned negative roles. Tragically, such patterns of thought have led Christians to overt acts of condescension, prejudice, and even violent acts of persecution.

4. Many Christians are convinced that they understand Judaism since they have the Hebrew scriptures as part of their Bible. This attitude is often enforced by lack of knowledge about the history of Jewish life and thought through the 1,900 years since Christianity and Judaism parted ways.

5. There is, therefore, a special urgency for Christians to listen, through study and dialogue, to ways in which Jews understand their history, their traditions, their faith, and their practice. Furthermore, a mutual listening to the way each is perceived by the other may be a step towards understanding the hurts, overcoming the fears, and correcting the misunderstandings that have thrived on isolation.

6. Both Judaism and Christianity contain a wide spectrum of opinions, theologies, and styles of life and service. Since generalizations often produce stereotyping, Jewish-Christian dialogue must try to be as inclusive of the variety of views within the two comunities as possible.

II. THE NECESSITY FOR CHRISTIANS TO UNDERSTAND JEWS AND JUDAISM

1. Through dialogue with Jews many, though yet too few, Christians have come to appreciate the richness and vitality of Jewish faith and life in the covenant and have been enriched in their own understandings of Jesus and the divine will for all creatures.

2. In dialogue with Jews, Christians have learned that the actual history of Jewish faith and experiences does not match the images of Judaism that have dominated a long history of Christian teaching and writing, images that have been spread by Western culture and literature into other parts of the world.

3. Jesus was a Jew, born into this tradition. He was nurtured by the Hebrew scriptures; which he accepted as authoritative and interpreted both in terms of the Judaism of his time and in fresh and powerful ways in his life and teaching, announcing that the Kingdom of God was at hand. In their experience of his resurrection, his followers confessed him as both Lord and Messiah.

4. Christians should remember that some of the controversies reported in the New Testament between Jesus and the "scribes and Pharisees" found parallels with Pharisaism itself and its heir, Rabbinic Judaism. The controversies generally arose in a Jewish context, but when the words of Jesus came to be used by Christians who did not identify with the Jewish people as Jesus did, such sayings often became weapons in anti-Jewish polemics and thereby their original intention was tragically distorted. An internal Christian debate is now taking place on the question of how to understand passages in the New Testament that contain anti-Jewish references.

5. From the early days of the church, many Christian interpreters saw the church replacing Israel as God's people. The destruction of the second

temple of Jerusalem was understood as a warrant for this claim. The covenant of God with the people of Israel was mistakenly seen only as a preparation for the coming of Jesus. As a consequence, the first covenant was considered to be abrogated.

6. This theological perspective has had fateful consequences. As the Christians understood themselves to replace the Jews as God's people, the Judaism that survived was denigrated as a fossilized religion of legalism. The Pharisees were thought to represent the height of legalism; Jews and Jewish groups were portrayed as negative models; and the truth and beauty of Christianity were thought to be enhanced by setting up Judaism as false and ugly. Unfortuantely, many of the early church fathers defamed the Jewish people.

7. Through a renewed study of Judaism and in dialogue with Jews, Christians have become aware that Judaism in the time of Jesus was but an early state of its long life. Under the leadership of Pharisees, the Jewish people began a spiritual revival of remarkable power, which gave them the vitality capable of surviving the catastrophe of the loss of the Temple. It gave birth to Rabbinic Judaism that produced the Mishnah (oral teachings) and Talmud and built the structures for a strong and creative life through the centuries.

8. For Judaism the Talmud joins the Torah as central and authoritative. Judaism is more than the religion of the scriptures of Israel. What Christians call the Old Testament (referred to by Jews as the Hebrew Scriptures or Hebrew Bible) has received in the Talmud and later writings interpretations that for Jewish tradition share in the authority of Torah.

9. For Christians the Bible with the two Testaments is also followed by

traditions of interpretation, from the church fathers to the present time. Both Jews and Christians live in the community of their scriptures, scriptural commentaries and living and developing traditions.

10. Christians as well as Jews look to the Hebrew Bible as the record of God's election and covenant with God's people. For Jews, it is their own story in historical continuity with the present. Christians, mostly of gentile background since early in the life of the church, believe themselves to have entered this covenant by grace through Jesus Christ. The relationship between the two communities, both worshiping the God of ancient Israel, is a given historical fact, but how it is to be understood theologically is a matter of internal discussion among Christians and Jews in dialogue.

11. Both commonalities and differences between Judaism and Christianity need to be examined carefully. Finding in the scriptures the authority sufficient for salvation, the Christian church shares Israel's faith in the One God, whom the church knows in the Spirit as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. For Christians, Jesus Christ is acknowledged as the only begotten Son of the Father, through whom millions have come to share in the love of, and to adore, the God who first made covenant with the people of Israel. Knowing the One God in Jesus Christ through the Spirit, therefore, Christians worship One God with a trinitarian confession involving creation, incarnation, and pentecost. In so doing, the church worships in a language that is strange to Jewish worship and sensitivities, yet full of meaning to Christians.

12. Christians and Jews both believe that God has created men and women and has called them to be holy and to exercise stewardship over the creation in accountability to God. Jews and Christians are taught by their

Palestinians--Christian and Muslim--as a part of their search for identity now calls for full attention.

III. HATRED AND PERSECUTION OF JEWS--A CONTINUING CONCERN

1. Christians need to be aware that hatred and persecution of Jews have a long, persistent history. This is particularly true in countries where Jews have been a minority presence among Christians. The tragic history of the persecution of Jews includes massacres by the Crusaders, the Inquisition, pogroms, and the Holocaust. The World Council of Churches Assembly at its first meeting in Amsterdam in 1948 declared: "We call upon the churches we represent to denounce antisemitism, no matter what its origin, as absolutely irreconcilable with the profession and practice of the Christian faith. Antisemitism is sin against God and human life." This appeal has been reiterated many times. Those who live where there is a history of prejudice and persecution of the Jews can serve the whole church by revealing that danger whenever it is recognized.

2. Teachings of contempt for Jews and Judaism in certain Christian traditions have proved a spawning ground for such evils as the Nazi Holocaust, the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, the defacement of synagogues; and discriminatory practices in private clubs and housing patterns keep this prejudice overt in our own nation. The church must learn to proclaim the Gospel without generating comtempt for Judaism or the Jewish people. A Christian response to the Holocaust is a resolve that it will never happen again to Jews or to any other people.

3. Discrimination and persecution of the Jewish people have deep-rooted social, economic, and political aspects. Religious differences are

scriptures and traditions to recognize their responsibility to their neighbors, especially the weak, the poor, and the oppressed. In various and distinct ways they look for the day in which God will redeem the creation. In dialogue with Jews, many Christians have come to a more profound appreciation of the Exodus hope of liberation, praying and working for the coming of peace on earth.

13. Jews found ways of living in obedience to Torah both before and after the emergence of Christianity. They maintained and deepened their call to be a peculiar people in the midst of the nations. Jews historically were allowed to live with respect and acceptance in some of the cultures in which they resided. Here their life and values thrived and made a distinct contribution to their Christian and Muslim neighbots. It remains a fact, however, that Christian countries have not proved more favorable for Jewish diaspora living than non-Christian countries.

14. The memory of the land of Israel and Zion, the city of Jerusalem, has always been central to the Jewish people. "Next year in Jerusalem" is a constant part of Jewish worship in the diaspora. The continued presence of Jews in the land and in Jerusalem is a focal point for Judaism. It is not just one place of residence among all others.

15. Many Jews differ in their interpretations of the religious and secular meaning of the state of Israel. Israel constitutes for almost all Jewish people a central part of the long search for that identity that has been integral to Judaism throughout the ages.

16. Jews, Christians, and Muslims have all maintained a presence in the land for centuries. The land is holy to all three, though they may understand holiness in different ways. The quest for homeland status by

magnified to justify ethnic hatred in support of vested interests. Similar manifestations are also evident in many interracial conflicts. Christians are called to oppose all religious prejudices, through which people are made scapegoats for the failures and problems of societies and political regimes.

IV. AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN WITNESS

1. Christians believe that God's self-revelation is given in history. In the covenant with the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai, the sacred law became part of our religious heritage. Christians see that same God embodied in the person of Jesus the Christ to whom the church must bear witness by word and deed. For the church to deny that mission would be false to its deepest commitment. Without denying a Christian responsibility to evangelize in the name of Christ and to welcome those of other religious traditions or none to embrace the good news of the Gospel, missionary witness directed at Jews is inappropriate.

2. The Christian witness, however, has been distorted by coercive proselytism, conscious and unconscious, overt and subtle. The Joint Working Group of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches stated: "Proselytism embraces whatever violates the right of the human person, Christian or non-Christian, to be free from external coercion in religious matters" (Ecumenical Review, 1/1971, p. 11).

3. Dialogue can rightly be described as a mutual witness. Its intention is to hear others in order to understand their faith, hopes, insights, and concerns. Its goal is to communicate truth as each person perceives truth within his or her own faith. The spirit of dialogue is to be present to another in full openness and in human vulnerability.

V. LITURGICAL OBSERVANCES

It seems appropriate that the relationship between Christians and Jews be observed annually. It ia suggested that the Feast of St. James of Jerusalem on October 23 or a Sunday before or after that date might be the proper occasion. Another such occasion might be the observance of Yom HaShoah, the Holocaust remembrance.